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## Beach bacteria battle goes high-tech

Chicagoland effort to keep water safe hits digital age

May 28, 2010 | By Joel Hood, TRIBUNE REPORTER

So much for the old warning flag on a stick.

Confronting an almost unwinnable battle against E. coli and other bacteria on public beaches, Chicago and some of its suburbs have taken the fight into the digital age.

From computer models that can predict conditions where bacteria will thrive, to swimming alerts and beach closures sent out via Twitter, Facebook and text message, officials have adopted high-tech strategies to better inform beachgoers of unhealthy conditions.

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"That's how people live now," said Cathy Breitenbach, manager of the Chicago Park District's Office of Green Initiatives. "People have an expectation today to get information quickly and in multiple ways. We're doing our best to meet that expectation."

As thousands across Chicago and the suburbs hit the beach this Memorial Day weekend, health officials warn of the dangers lurking out of sight.

The popular beaches that line the lakefront in Chicago and communities to the north have long been a melting pot for E. coli and other harmful bacteria. Stormwater runoff, pet waste, bird droppings and urban trash contribute to microscopic mountains of filth that can lead to sore throats, stomachaches and all kinds of ailments.

The number of swimming bans has increased in recent years, officials say, likely due to more frequent testing for bacteria than an actual drop-off in water quality. Twice a day, researchers walk the city's 31 beaches collecting water samples in small plastic tubes and sending them to a lab for analysis.

The trouble with that method of water sampling is that results aren't known until the next day. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and U.S. Geological Survey are pioneering research off Chicago's beaches, using DNA analysis to test for bacteria, that will one day shorten the lab work to a couple of hours, allowing for almost instantaneous water monitoring, said Richard Whitman, a USGS ecologist.

"The results we've been living with are yesterday's numbers, and that's not always good enough," Whitman said. "We know water conditions can change pretty quickly."

This month, Whitman and other scientists dumped red dye into the water a half-mile off 63rd Street Beach, one of the most problematic waterfronts in the city, to track the speed and direction of lake currents in the hopes of better understanding how bacteria builds up along the shoreline.

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